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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/KSD WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION CENEVA 0531
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2443
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000375

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SUBJECT: KYRGYZSTAN: LEGALIZING POLYGAMY: A REAL THREAT?

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: While the issue of polygamy in Kyrgyzstan has been raised before, t(e topic is now being actively debated in Kyrg9z society as a result of Parliament's recent consideration and rejection of a bill to decriminalize the practice. The wide-spread debate of this issue shows how the KYrgyz continue to reach back to traditions from pre-Soviet past and how prominent government officials can influence trends in Kyrgyz society in an attempt to legitimize their own personal choices. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On February 28, the Women's Political Discussion Club, a group of professional women, held one of it3 bimonthly discussion meetings on the topic of polygamy in Kyrgyz society. The debate attracted many high-level government officials as well as active leaders of NGO's and international organizations ijcluding the Minister of Justice Mr. Marat Kayipov; the representative of the President on gender issues in the Parliament (Jogorku Kenesh), Ms. Anara Niyazova; an attorney from the Jogorku Kenesh, Ms. Boljurova; representative from the office of Ombudsman Koshokov; and a wide representation of local NGOs.

13. (C) The debate on polygamy is not new to Kyrgyzstan, in the past (mid 1990s) there was an attempt to legalize polygamy. When the bill reached the floor of the Jogorku Kenesh, it failed to pass by only a few votes. The issue of polygamy has again become a topic of discussion in society because many prominent government officials, members of Parliament, and possibly including President Bakiyev and former Prime Minister Kulov are rumored to have more then one wife. There is a widespread belief that President Bakiyev himself was one of the initiators of the debate on legalizing

polygamy, though publicly he presents himself as an active opponent of polygamy. On March 26, 2007, a proposal on decriminalizing polygamy was defeated in the Jogorku Kenesh. While polygamy continues to be a formal criminal offense under the Kyrgyz Criminal Code, discussion of the issue continues.

¶4. (SBU) The issue of polygamy has created some strange bedfellows. Among proponents is the Minister of Justice, Marat Kayipov, who has been vocal on the issue and has stated that polygamy is not "dangerous" for society and could very well serve as a support structure for families of single mothers with several dependant children. Ombudsmen Tursunbai Bakir Uulu has said he supports polygamy because it protects the rights of minorities. A local journalist, Ozbok Chotonov, openly admitted to having two wives. He claimed that having several wives presents no conflicts or any other emotional or economic issues.

¶5. (SBU) The opponents of polygamy included many of the women NGO leaders and some government officials. Ms. Kalicha Omuralieva, a gender equality activist and a member of the Kyrgyz Jeri party, argued that polygamy not only creates psychological and emotional problems for the women in such families, but it also creates a negative perception of the state, since it encourages obvious gender inequality and allows men to discriminate against women. She also addressed some of the arguments offered by polygamy supporters. On the issue of minorities, she stated that men who marry several women at the same time are usually the wealthiest men in society and they certainly do not represent an oppressed minority. On the issue of supporting poor women without husbands, she pointed out that men generally do not marry elderly women with several children, but, in fact, generally marry young women without any dependants. Another women

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leader, Anara Moldosheva, stated that the practice of polygamy should be prosecuted and fought against harshly in order to implement the current law on polygamy. She also expressed her opinion that the wide-spread discussion of this topic is an unfortunate sign of the direction Kyrgyzstan is heading. The President's representative expressed concern about an attempt to decriminalize polygamy and suggested that in case criminal liability is removed, civil measures such as administrative and civil fines should be instituted to punish polygamy.

¶6. (C) Comment: Polygamy remains illegal in Kyrgyzstan, but it is practiced and laws are largely unenforced. Polygamists in Kyrgyzstan can be divided into two groups: those who are religious and have taken several wives in accordance with their Islamic beliefs, and those who want to engage in bigamy simply because of a perceived enhancement in their social status. This is still an issue relating to a minority of Kyrgyz society) it is estimated that only a small percentage of men practice polygamy, but judging from the huge public debate on this issue in March, the practice could become more prevalent in the future.

¶7. (C) As Kyrgyzstan continues to form its national identity 15 years after independence from Soviet and Russian rule, there are competing influences. Even as the country becomes more modern, there are some who are reading back to Kyrgyzstan's pre-Soviet past to determine what is authentically "Kyrgyz." Some of these traditions do not promote women's equality and rights such as polygamy and bride-kidnapping, a practice which is markedly increasing in the countryside.
YOVANOVITCH